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Dimensions of Justice in the African Epic: The Normative Imperative

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Abstract

The focus of the African epic points to the domains of power and influence. This makes the concept of justice an imperative consideration because power and influence require legitimization and restraint for the good of any society. Unfortunately, scholarly scrutiny into the dynamics of justice in the African epic and heroic tales is minimal. This study, foregrounded on the normative theory, examines the concept of justice as it intertwines with other aspects of traditional African life. Through textual analysis the study examines the place of justice in the interactions between the personalities of epic heroes and their contemporaries. It also studies how the epics highlight justice in the attainment of social cohesion and foster the health of their societies. The African epic tales artistically articulates the principles related to justice.

Keywords: dimension, justice, normative, epic.

1. Introduction

The African epic provides fertile ground for the analysis of the concept of justice, not only because of its deep engagement with human nature, but also because of the class of its lead characters, who generally occupy hegemonic positions as kings and rulers. Focusing on how these lead characters contravene moral and legal limits, and how, in turn, they require requital for justice, the article shows the complexities of power play on views in African epics. The study observes that because there were no written constitutions in the era of the composition of epics, what constitutes law – and, in turn, the collective agreement of justice – can be found in the way epics describe the norms of a given society. In making this case, the article shows how the monarch's enforcement of laws, and the sanctions for contravening them, are often revealed in epics to be excessive; or they are limited by divinity, the intervention of close allies, or the observance of certain forms of etiquette. In some cases, poetic and divine justice feature prominently in the epics through stylistic mediums such as the ironic boomerang, which treats monarch and subject, as equal, and, in so doing, asserts a form of justice against which there is no defense.

2. The nature of justice in the African epic

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Justice in the African epic is compelling because it combines emotion and reason. To interpret the complexities of the interface of emotion and reason, the normative approach is preferred for this study because justice has to do with right and wrong, which in themselves have illusive strains because they are not particularly measurable, they are non-fixated standards and the inability to measure up to the former may imply alignment with the later. Human societies lay premium on justice for survival; therefore, the gamut of culture prescribes justice in various ways that include morality, decorum, empathy, etc. These culminate in standard behaviour that becomes norms, such that deviation could constitute taboo and call for sanction. Non-written codes in traditional Africa constitute the acceptable conduct that are standardized through repeated practice. Often the norms within the culture are the outcome of the metaphysical interactions that exists between the human world and the spiritual world. In traditional African societies as seen in the selected African epics, the spiritual dictates to the physical. That explains John Mbiti (1969) observation that in Africa, "Everybody is a religious career." There is always the consciousness of divine justice constraining behaviour in a manner that is appropriate to the religious expectations of the community. The supernatural world plays the most significant role in determining what is just and what is unjust although sometimes there are contradictions in the expectations. This examination of the African epic reveals that norms form the base of the superstructure of justice in traditional Africa.

In the Sundiata Epic, the cultural norm for succession prescribes the eldest son of the king as heir apparent, but Sundiata's father upholds prophecy against tradition and pronounces Sundiata, the younger to his eldest son Dankara Touman as his heir. However, this plunges his family into chaos as rivalry ensues and antics are employed to resist the prophecy. Sundiata's points of legitimacy to the throne includes the prophecy of his accession, the award of a griot by his father, and his qualities of charisma, courage, military and administrative prowess which vindicate him. The epic infuses the supernatural and tradition at complex levels in revealing the theme of justice. By tradition, Dankara Touman was the heir apparent until by prophecy Sundiata was designated as King even before his birth. This earns him the wrath of his stepmother who hires nine witches to kill him. This act ushers another dimension of justice in the Mandinka tradition. As the witches, could not kill Sundiata because there was no personal offence between Sundiata and them. This demonstrates that although the supernatural is superior, it can be curbed by moral codes. To compound issues, Sundiata goes on exile because of the antics of his stepmother, leaving the kingdom to her son, but in a classical enactment of poetic justice, her son was conquered by Sumuoaro the sorcerer king of the Ssoso. This conquest further elucidates the rules of engagement of the Mandinka.

Soumauro comes into the justice scene on two counts, he takes the kingdom from the illegitimate king DankaranTouman by conquest, and he conscripts Sundiata's royal griot, Bala Faséekée, because of his mastery of the *balafon* (xylophone). Soumauro uses military might to undermine prophecy as his path to legitimacy. Secondly his forceful acquisition of Bala Faséekée, challenges Sundiata's claim to the throne of Niani. The conflict gets resolved at the battle of Krina where he suffers the defeat that subsumes his kingdom into the Mali Empire. Sundiata's victory simultaneously adjudicates Soumauro's atrocities and restores the kingdom. This eliminates the Soso tyrannical rule such that even though Sassoume Bérété and Dankaran Touman are not on the scene to receive their punishment, they are consigned to oblivion and if remembered, then only in negative terms. An important dimension of justice manifests in the Sundiata epic; the return to original state before offence because Sundiata assumes the kingship given to him by his father, the recovery of his royal griot and fulfilment of prophecy.

Redressing other atrocious actions of Soumauro reflects the nature of Justice. The defeat of kings is a normal practice in those days but subjecting their remains to the kind of use Soumaoro puts them to is abnormal and abominable, it also shows great disregard for humankind. Soumaoro uses the remains of conquered kings to garner fear for him and his kingdom before his

subjects and other kingdoms. Therefore, the surrounding peoples are eager to join Sundiata to subdue the menace he poses. The destruction of the seven-storey building by Sundiata is therefore ideal in the sight of the people because it obliterates the aura of danger that the demonic powers convey. Sages are the pride and wisdom of a traditional society because of their knowledge and experience, therefore, the flogging of sages whether private or public is simply unheard of as it disregards the age grade system by which community members grow into the ideal personality and the respect and honour of old age. While these points of offence are noted, Sundiata enjoys group support as a mark of the rightness of his cause, a large company of armies from allied kings come to his support in regaining Niani and forming a confederate empire and his installation as emperor.

In the "Epic of the Bamana of Segu," the reliance on cultural norms to define justice is demonstrated. The dying *Famaa* Monzo instructs *Famaa* Da, his son and successor, to conquer Samanyana, a city he fails to conquer during his reign. That request places duty on the new king but Dantē, his griot cautions him that it is not right to attack Basi, the king of Samanyana, without a cause. Dante cautions, "When one noble wants to fight another, he must have a good reason/ Would you attack just because you are a *Faama*, /...That would not be right." (David, 2004). However, *Famaa* Da seeks justification by exploiting the contempt Basi has for his ancestry by requesting for the hand of Basi's daughter in marriage. He says:

> *Let us send somebody to Basi telling him to give us his virgin daughter for your wife*
>
> *Oh, if Basi gives us his daughter, then we will become wedding allies.*
>
> *We will become relatives.*
>
> *War between us will no longer be good,*
>
> *We will not have to kill each other.*
>
> *What if Basi refuses to give us his daughter?*
>
> *Ah, ha! If Basi refuses to give us his daughter, we will use it as an excuse*
>
> *to attack Samanyana*. (David, 2004)

Basi refuses because Ngolo, *Famaa* Da's ancestor, was once a slave before he became king. To defeat Basi's arrogant confidence in the secret power that protects his city, *Famaa* Da discovers the best means to conquer Samanyana. His seven marabouts tell him that he must get Basi's first handful of food, his sandals and his hat, with these items, he can subdue him. Sijanma, a slave girl, gets these items and he successfully conquers Basi. However, he kills the slave girl, the seven marabouts and Basi's favourite wife who compromises the army by pouring water on their gunpowder. He kills them because he feels they will betray him the same way they betrayed Basi.

Questions regarding justice arise from *Famaa* Da's actions. Should *Famaa* Da have neglected his father's request because Basi has never offended him personally? When a slave rises to royalty under a dynastic change, does his status remain that of a slave or a noble, and vice versa for a noble who loses his position? Ironically, Basi, who disregards Da for being the great grandson of a slave, falls in love with a slave girl who disguises like a noble woman. Basi behaves indiscreetly before her to his own detriment by revealing the secret of his power. Is death a just recompense for Famaa Da's allies, especially Sijanma and Basi's favourite wife? Situations like this occurring in literature lead to the conclusion that rather than justice, injustice prevails in literature (Nadel, 2018). Questions like those above give a philosophical bent to the analysis of justice in the African epic, they also indicate the need to understand the elements that constitute a people's worldview. Unfortunately, documents about life in the times of epic heroes are scanty, to the extent that scholars working on justice in traditional Africa lament that the dust of Eurocentric notions of

justice have so much buried the African justice reality that there is widespread consensus that Africa did not develop tangible justice systems (Gluckman & Dagleish, 1964).

However, we have glimpses of the situation from some scholars. Dagleish (2005) uncovers the practice of delivering criminal justice in the Songhai empire which has a two-tier system in which Qadis, with the aid of organized local police called the *assaramoundio*, judge common crimes while cases of treason fall to the Askia (emperor) who also has royal prisons. Gluckman explains the economic and social background on which the principle of African justice is situated. Africans, he surmises, live in close communion and engage in social and economic activities together, therefore, a breach of relationship disrupts order, and this can lead to the destruction of the community. Based on this, prolonged tolerance and reconciliation for the survival of the polity is at the heart of justice in traditional Africa. It is in line with the principle of reconciliatory justice that Da's griot counsels against war between him and Basi at the first instance:

Although it is apparent that *Famaa* Da's mind is set on war because of his duty to his father and the blessings attached to his obedience to paternal duty, certain social codes in which equity and decorum are imbedded restrain him. At the same time, the marriage alliance offers a solution to the burden of his father's request. On the killings of his faithful allies, the contemporary reader must understand Segu as a kingdom of intrigues. This could resolve the contradiction and absolves Da of blame in what appears as treacherous ingratitude. Survival and governance in Segu from king to king and dynasty to dynasty is tied to one's cunning and dexterity in the act of intrigues. To appreciate the intrigues, there are other events that serve as good examples. The first is seen in Ngolo's brothers who sell him into slavery because they notice his inherent qualities. Another is revealed when *Faama* Biton, his master notices his potential greatness and realizing through divination that Ngolo will be the next *Faama* instead of his own offspring, thereby effecting a dynastic change, he tries to kill him severally until his favourite wife sends him away by deception. *Faama* Da's accession is the will of his father even though he is not the eldest child, so it sails through intrigues as he forces the elders and chiefs to accept him at the cost of their lives. He also hires Bakari Jan to deal with Bilisi and later tries to kill him because he fears Bakari Jan's popularity among the people and obviously sees him as a threat to his reign. It is also the manner of Segu's rulers to pay informants for information about dissidents, the *Famaa* eventually executes these informants for the safety of his dynasty and the kingdom. Under a political terrain of this nature, it may be considered prudent that a leader behaves in the manner of *Famaa* Da towards the people who know his secrets. It is, however, important to note that life, from time immemorial, has been adjudged to be sacred and taking it under any guise without the law saying so, and in unjustifiable circumstances such as this, is a transgression.

3. Royalty and justice in the African epic

Although epic poetry belongs to the community, it often promotes the interests of the elite because most heroes are of the nobility, it thereby upholds, covertly or overtly, the myth of blue blood and the caste system inherent in it. The ambition and sentiments of the hero is sometimes the national quest, his ideology reflects the cultural worldview, and he is in the position to shape values, beliefs and norms through the legitimacy vested in his office as king/emperor, champion, etc. The hero is the reflection of the ideals of his people because of his possession of the heroic element which comprises might, occult science and group support (Mulokozi, 2023). The might of the hero has to do with the qualities of his character and, in some cases, an imposing physique, that makes him a commanding figure, others are strength, courage, charisma, etc. The spiritual enhances the mysticism of the hero because it elevates him above the human level. These two crystalize into group support because they draw admiration and confidence from his people, and they flow into his hegemonic influence. In addition, the epic text reinforces his hegemony and

that of his descendants because its recitation is the exhibition of a national artefact and an occasion for reaffirming the belief in the national destiny. Although epic texts present heroes who use their overwhelming popularity for good, hegemonic monopoly is a means to excess in the African epic and heroic tale. The justice principle however intervenes and moderates the excesses of heroes variously.

Chaka, the Zulu, is an example of excess, his quest for power through kingdom expansion has no limits, with its high cost on both his people and those he vanquishes. For instance, he kills his warriors who lose their weapons in battle and those who could not kill an enemy but return home with their weapons, while those who plead for them have their tongues cut off (Mofolo, 1981). By such highhandedness, he instils a thirst for conquest in his army and silences all alternative voices, thereby sustaining the monopoly of hegemony solely to himself. This contravenes the law of communality. Consequentially, his brothers assassinate him, because apart from rivalry and jealousy, "the actions of kings were constantly assessed… if they broke the law too frequently, their rivals for kingly power might genuinely raise rebellion against the king to defend the rule, or at least might exploit subjects' grievances to lead an attack on the king for his lawless and tyrannical behavior" (Gluckman, 1964). The heroic tale of Chaka the Zulu does not include prophecy about Chaka's birth, but his succession story is one of family upheavals and danger. Chaka's conception and birth was against the moral code established by the community, so his stepmothers used that to work against him; however, he grows into a mighty warrior and Dingiswayo, his father's overlord recognizes his right to the throne. In addition, his charisma and great stature eventually contributed to establishing him as the king. The strife in Chaka's family creates unfair decisions and actions for which he feels aggrieved and seeks to get recompense, which has great implications for the treatment of justice in African heroic tales.

"The Bamana Epic" demonstrates how justice within the power ambience is checked. Bilisi becomes notorious for his disregard for social decorum. He enslaves freeborn children at will as *jado* (a form of slavery), uses them to pay for corn beer, and fails to doff the hat for elders. This attitude is outrageous in a traditional and stratified society where the freedom or dignity of the individual and respect for elders is of high premium. A courageous man knocks off Bilisi's cap at a communal meeting in the seven halls without any opposition from other community members. This signifies their assent to the act and their disgust at such continued misbehaviour. Bilisi leaves *Segu* for *Saye* in *Masina* land with the threat that something will happen to *Segu* if any human touches his portion of brave men's meat (a special portion of meat given to warriors). He would rather have the birds of the air or other animals take the portion, which they allocate to him in absentia.

In "The Mwindo Epic," Shemwindo, Mwindo's father, transgresses against the principle of justice in the following ways when he forbids his wives to have male children:

1. He places an inconsiderably impossible demand on his wives because it was not within their power or himself to determine the gender of the to be born child. This is disregard for *Ongo*the divinity that empowers procreation "when you said that you did not want (any) boys, that you wanted only girls; you did a deliberate wrong in the way you desired."

2. His demand seeks the destabilization of his kingdom because as king, there can be anarchy if after his death there is no successor to his throne.

3. He acts murderously and mercilessly against an innocent child that is the product of his procreation as he repeatedly seeks to kill the infant Mwindo.

4. He conscripts his entire realm into collaborative malignity through his authority as king as he makes his people to support his unreasonable actions.

Shemwindo fails to appreciate the limits of his power and so he commits offences that are heinous and selfish. His decision is bound to destroy him, his posterity, and his community, especially when it is observed that the entire age grades of the community comprising great grandparents, grandparents, parents, youths and children, who are all products of procreation, have aligned with him. It was that,

> *They picked up the drum; all the people abandoned the village; they went to throw Mwindo… When they (*divers/swimmers*) arrived in the middle of the pool, they cried out with a loud voice: 'Shall we drop him here?' All those who were sitting on the edge of the river shouted 'Yes' altogether: It is there, so that you will not be the cause of his return.* (Daniel et al., 1969)

He shows that he is not worthy of Mwindo for the Banyanga believe that "to give birth to a son is to rest". Worse still, had he succeeded, the Banyanga worldview would alter negatively, since as king he despises the birth of male children. He fails to understand that it is by replacing retrogressive worldviews with progressive ones that society moves forward.

The judgement scene between Mwindo and his father is a community affair with nobles, elders, counsellors and all present. All parties in contention speak before the entire community with Iyangura adjudicating. Shemwindo humbles himself and accepts his wrong, he loses half of his kingdom to his son even while he is still alive, which is abnormal because kingdoms are inherited not shared. This shows that the premium on justice is above royalty. However, a point of royal immunity must be stressed, Iyangura says: "If it were a counsellor from whom this plan of torment against Mwindo had emanated, then his throat would be cut, here in this council. But you are safe, it being from you whom this plan sprang" (Daniel et al., 1969).

Shemwindo's action is worthy of death, but being king, he is safe, implying that there are special privileges which kings enjoy before the law above other citizens. The immunity clause in current constitutional practice that protects office holders from prosecution while in office is reflective of Shemwindo's privilege, the difference being that as a king he enjoys it for life while current office holders' immunity only lasts through their tenure. This method of dealing with cases is resonated in Greek epics, especially the Iliad when the case between Agamemnon and Achilles is brought to the council and each of them presents his argument. Fair hearing is therefore prominent in The Mwindo Epic. Understanding the themes of the text illuminates the justice principle. Mwindo forgives and resuscitates all his father's allies whom he had earlier vanquished. His mood swings from one extreme to another, initially he harbours hatred for his father, "Hatred is in the heart," towards the end he treats his father well. Herein lies the triumph of good over evil, the wicked seeks to annihilate, but when overpowered, receives forgiveness. This is the victory of justice.

Thomas Hale's records of the Epic of Askia, Mohammed is a literary masterpiece that stultify the security of crown and dynasty. The oracle reveals to Si that it "is Kaseye who/will give birth to a child who will kill him and take over the/ throne of Gao" (Thomas, 1990). He therefore kills seven of Kaseye's sons at birth until Mamar (Askia Mohammed) is born. The killing of kin infants by Si reveals the extent to which he seeks to protect his throne for his descendants. There is no sufficient justification for his action, and this could not squash the prophecy he so desperately seeks to avert. Ranging from Shemwindo, Si, Biton to *famaa* Da it is apparent that kings in the African epic, like their counterparts in real live and all over the world, are deeply jealous for throne and glory and they sometimes commit atrocities in guarding them. Divine justice however, curbs royal immunity and metes justice on royalty. In that way, kings to whom the last appeal is made are themselves subject to judgement. Mwindo goes about in his boasts about his abilities "You see that you are powerless against Mwindo. /For Mwindo is the Little-one-just-born-he-has-walked" (Daniel et al., 1969). Mwindo defeats a host of great antagonists however, he crosses the line when he kills Dragon, Nkuba's blood friend, and Nkuba takes him prisoner to the celestial realm to be judged. The celestial inhabitants state the nature of Mwindo's offence; he is proud, because he

does not accept criticism, he claims to be tough and heroic and most of all, he makes himself Nkuba's equal. Rain and Hail inflict pain on him, Moon burns his hair, Sun burns him dry until he cries in vain for water. He learns to accept his limitations, "Mwindo said: 'This time I am in trouble in every way…Oh, father Shemwindo, bless me, and may my *conga* not get out of my hands (that is that may he not die)" (Daniel et al., 1969)

The proud and self-confident Mwindo reduced to a suppliant fearing the loss of his life while he learns with his ears pulled several times literally, until he accepts Nkuba as his guardian (Master). Nkuba's intervention is to place restraint and curtail excess on his people for the general good of the society. On his return, he enacts laws that promote love and peace, and the duties of citizens to their chief and the chiefs to the people. The relationship between the chief and the people is to "Accept the chief and fear him and may he also fear you" (Daniel et al., 1969) it proposes good governance and civic duties. The Mwindo epic presents situations in which divine justice and natural justice intertwine showing that mercy is a premium component of divine justice. This principle resonates in the Lianja epic when Lianja resurrects the wicked and unfaithful Sau-Sau and the Fete-Fete and carries them to paradise along with his people who remain faithful to Ngiambe. Mamar presents another example of divine intervention when the text records how Si fails to cross the Red Sea on his initial attempt to go to Mecca, the reason being "There is no path. /Anyone who has killed an ancestor does not have the right to cross to Mecca. His gift is up against him" (Daniel et al., 1969). Si is obviously the ancestor in reference, and this raises questions about the rightness of Mamar's killing of Si. Herein lies a sharp difference between poetic/natural justice and divine justice because the oracle only makes a revelation without using Si's cruelty as justification for his assassination. Besides, in divine justice, divinity chooses the instrument for implementing justice, and man does not arrogate the instrumentality upon himself. Mamar must meet the conditions set by divinity for him to cross the red sea, and the price he pays is to fight Jihads during which he loses his army. These two accounts show that in the face of divine justice in the African epic, royalty does not enjoy immunity, and that in the era when kings reign supreme, power is not absolute as far as divine justice is concerned.

Justice is one of the major heroic qualities expected in the lifespan of every political era so whoever must ascend the throne must be seen as having this character. In instances where justice is lacking, the plot of the epic tale becomes replete with villainous acts before the emergence of the messianic figure. Gassire's Lute captures the role of succession crisis in the fall of Dierra, the first kingdom of Wagadu. Through Gassire's ambition to rule in the stead of his father, the ailing and aged Nganamba Fasa who clings to life and kingly power. His ambition makes him ask, "When will Nganamba die? /When will Gassire be king?" (Jablow, 1971). His lust for power overrides the praise and honour he receives for his victories under his father as he only longs for the day he will possess his father's royal sword and shield. The wise Kiekoro makes a prophesy of his fate:

> Ah Gassire!
>
> Ng anamba will die soon enough.
>
> But you will never carry his sword and shield.
>
> Sword and shield will others inherit.
>
> And your lute will cause the loss of Wagadu!
>
> Ah, Gassire! (Jablow, 1971)

Gassire will not listen until he loses his seven sons as predicted by the blacksmith, and the people send him away from Wagadu. The epic reveals that there were four successive times that the Wagadu empire rises and falls because of the base manifestation of the human nature. Gassire encounters a guinea fowl, which speaks to him in a song:

All creatures must die, be buried and vanish.

Kings and heroes die, are buried, and vanish.

I, too, shall die, shall be buried, and vanish. (Jablow, 1971)

The song captures the nature of human life which is hard to cure. Driven by the lust for fame he says, "Then let Wagadu be lost." His view, which spring from his lust for power, contradicts the Soninke philosophy:

Gassire, this must come to an end.

We fight willingly, but only as we must.

In your rage, you go on fighting without need, and without end.

Now go forth from Dierra!

Take those who would join you.

Take your slaves and your cattle.

As for us, we desire more of life than of fame.

And while we should not like to die fameless,

we have no wish to die for fame alone. (Jablow. 1971)

The Soninke honour fame, but they honour life more and will not die for fame because things must be in their right proportions. They also know that beyond the victory of battle for Wagadu there is something personal that Gassire pursues, and he is using his sons to attain it. The community, in its judgement, expels him from Dierra. In Gassire inordinate ambition, he fails to care if the nation collapses. Consequently, the very society whose destiny he seeks to use for personal gain punishes him through collective agreement. It is apparent that the consultation of oracles, witch doctors and prophecy are strong components of the succession story in African epics. This is because of the need to grapple with the present and understand the future, even as kings are anxious about the destinies of their kingdoms and their legacies.

The story of Ngolo exemplifies the primacy of divination in African epics. Ngolo is a unique child in his family. This makes his brothers jealous of him and they dispose him to slavery so that the prophecy of his coming greatness will fail. Biton his master reads the signs of greatness in him:

Ngolo was weary from the journey.

He lay down near the mat and sleep took him.

As he slept, his nostrils kept repeating the sound 'power'.

Ngolo's nostrils kept repeating the sound 'power',

The wind coming from his nostrils was power.

He did that three times, and Biton was bewildered. (Mubuma, 1999)

Biton seeks explanation from oracles, which identify Ngolo as the next *famaa* in the stead of his sons. This places Ngolo in danger before Binton because he could not imagine the throne leaving his house for a slave to sit on. He seeks to kill Ngolo severally but fails. The Lianja epic renders the prophetic birth of a hero with one of the longest periods of fulfilment in African epics as it lingers four generations before Lianja is born. The prophecy of Lianja's birth is sustained by a unique faith in Ngiambe despite, his father's disappearance from his mother's womb and his prolonged pregnancy. The prophecy of heroes' births underscores the place of destiny in the African epic and the believe in the supernatural as an element of the then composite African psyche mediated by structures like oracles and diviners. It must have also been integrated to

legitimize the oligarchic system and to stabilize dynasties, the epic therefore serves as base for the superstructure of the worldview of the community of its production, especially when considered that its subject is within the realms of power and influence.

Crisis, intrigues, stiff and unhealthy competition are recurrent decimals in succession/transition periods in the African epic as in contemporary governance. In the epic, however, personal worth is prime to the acquisition of group support and legitimacy. The heroes mentioned above develop acumen in the various areas that matter in leadership and control without which a kingdom is subsumed in those days of empire and dynasty. Military capability, administrative control and occult science wove into the emergence of heroes, and empires that resound in history and have proven relevance in the present era were established. The beginnings of these heroes are marked by extreme situations of injustice which get resolution in the growth and development of the heroes, this will be examined under the poetics of justice.

4. The poetics of justice

The concept of justice maintains moral equilibrium, promotes equity and creates a sense of worth to a community member. Justice is the means by which the notion of social security, regard for fellow man and restraint are cultivated in a community. Abrams et al. (2009) understand the concept of poetic justice as "the distribution, at the end of a literary work, of earthly rewards and punishments in proportion to the virtue or vice of the various characters." In The Ozidi Saga, the malicious murder of Ozidi Snr. by Ofe and his group of conspirators dissipates Temugedege royal tenure and at the same time prevents the appointment of a new king. Although Ofe and his group occupy hegemonic spaces, he lacks legitimacy. This action is against the Orua community and to the Ozidi family, but artistically the order of importance is reversed and the Ozidi family is projected to enhance the emotional element by which the text retains audience interest. This is a literary sublimation that makes Ozidi the symbol of Orua and transfers the pains of Orua to the Ozidi family. Orua's struggle to reassert itself is immersed in the process and difficulties of Ozidi's conquest of the Ofe group in the set of fights in which he avenges his father's murder. Tragically, Ozidi moves into the second phase of his fights through which he seeks to prove his status as a champion, he contravenes moral codes, especially when he begins to seduce Odogu's wife. This is a literary portrayal of human fallibility and contradictions as Ozidi who returns to Orua with a great sense of offence is now transgressing against someone in the marital space.

Poetic justice is affected by what this study calls ironic boomerang operating mostly in the forms of irony. The element comprises ignorance, memory oblivion, realization and nemesis. Actions are taken without a full grasp of their implications, whether negative or positive, and soon forgotten while nemesis lurks ahead. Illustrations are taken from a range of tales to illuminate this assertion. The consuming jealousy of Sassouma Bérété drives her to display the crippled Sundiata to public view and ridicule only to enhance the dramatic way he gains the use of his legs. On that occasion, while Sundiata stands up on his feet for the first time, "she trembled from head to foot" (Niane, 1965: 21). The irony here is that all Sassouma Bérété's expectations fail, her actions only produce the opposite result that damns her and uplifts Sundiata. Similarly, jealousy and blackmail send Chaka out of his father's house, while his stepmothers felt triumphant, the exiled Chaka is building himself up for greatness through the severity that his expulsion from home brought on him. The prowess he develops discredit his rival brothers and makes them dismal and pathetic competitors for their father's throne. When he kills a lion and rescues his brother's fiancée from a spirit-possessed hyena, his brother Mfonkazana only stands helplessly and shamefully discredited before his fiancée and the community who doubt his ability to be a protective husband and a leader. Si, having killed all his nephews and satisfies himself that he has eliminated the threat to his dynasty ends up blessing the infant Mamar ignorantly in a classic ironic instance of blessing

his curse and the cause of his downfall. These examples show the place of ignorance and shortness of memory over past actions, they buttress the fact that justice may be delayed for long, but it will surely come irrespective of one's position in society. In the epics, the once crippled Sundiata becomes emperor, Mamar slays the emperor and takes his throne and Ozidi, returns to avenge his father. Those who opposed them have no inkling of impending judgement.

Contrast is a device used to show the differences between characters and situations in literature. The use of contrast accentuates the need for justice because the actions and thoughts of characters in their interactions with each other expose the hurt or comfort and the opposition or support they show. Contrast juxtaposes, in this case, qualities of characters in ways that they appear distinct and analysable to the audience. In dealing with justice, contrast lays little emphasis on physical appearance because it focuses on proportions of right and wrong in human conduct, except in the case of Bilisi whose physical form accentuates his propensity to notoriety. The following table contains contrasted characters and their qualities.

Table 1.

CHARACTER	ACTION/QUALITY	CHARACTER	ACTION/QUALITY
Sogolon Kedjou	enduring, caring	SassoumaBérété	Jealous, malicious, scheming, disregards oracles
Sundiata	respectful, courageous, charismatic	DankaranTouman	cowardly, tactless
Kassaye	enduring, cunning	Si	cruel, scheming, disregards oracles
Chaka	courageous, powerful, innovative, loyal, cruel	Mfokazana	cowardly, jealous
Mwindo	courageous, forgiving irrepressible, proud, respectful and loving to his father	Shemwindo	cruel, cowardly, selfish, humble
Itonde/Lianja	reverent, forgiving	Chief Sau-Sau	irreverent, cruel

The table above reveals how audience empathy is engineered through characterization because thought and action uncover the motivation and intension in the hearts of characters. It also shows why alignment or dissociation between characters and between audience and characters is formed. Contrast attains these by portraying qualities that stimulate emotions that incite the audience to make choices between characters, at certain points liking them and at others disliking them due to the good or bad qualities they exhibit. For example, the heinous cruelty with which Si acts to protect his throne solicits negative emotions. The text shows that sometimes emotions can oscillate for some characters because of the changes that time, and realization bring on them. Shemwindo remains negative for a good part of the text until he admits his wrong and seeks to make amends by abdicating, he says, "I don't deny all the evil that I have done against this, my offspring, my son" (Daniel et al., 1969). That helps him to obtain sympathy. Chaka experience is in the reverse order because he goes from popularity to disrepute.

In developing heroes and protagonists, literary composers often create opportunities for greatness. Contrast gives opportunity for heroes to rise by providing spaces within which they can notch higher in the moral scale and the emotional plane. The development of protagonists and antagonists as binary opposites further projects the image of the hero as he/she grows in resilience and dexterity and eventually overcomes the schemes of the antagonist. An example is seen when

Sassouma Bérété mocks Sogolon for Sundiata's crippled state after she begs for a few baobab leaves. Sundiata brings an entire baobab tree for his mother. While Dankaran Touman sits on the throne without any record of bravery, Sundiata grows strong in hunting and becomes a *Sinbon*. The same pattern exists between Sundiata and Soumaoro so that it becomes easy for the audience to admire Sundiata, as his image becomes more positive, and that of his antagonists become more negative.

A critical aspect of poetics in the African epic is language use. This is apparent because the epic text is primarily stored in the memory and its performance is oral, performers therefore manipulate the spoken word for effects that forcefully convey content, enthral and solicit audience participation Okpewho (1979), Daniel (1976) Domenica (1994). Performers draw extensively from the reservoir of language and cultural practices to nuance their subject in ways that make adept language use perhaps the most prominent resource they possess because language has ability to transmit thought and evoke powerful emotions. The context of justice includes the norm, transgression and reprimand successively at work in a community's understanding. The language of the Lianja epic makes the justice context recurrent as it overtly foregrounds the need, and the injunction to the living Mongo people to conform to Ngiambe's laws. From the beginning of the epic, the religious undertone manifests in the visitation of Ianian Anzaka Bokulu Tondi, the spirit who brings prophecy of Lianja's birth. Language use amplifies the implications of the spirit's message and the appropriate attitude or reaction to the message:

The day the voice was heard

Silence surged into our cosmos like a star

That Mongo earth was shaken uncontrollably

A voice, round, powerful and mysterious

Opened and jolted our universe

Earth and heaven shuddered

The holy mountains of Mongoland were torn apart

The valleys of our cosmos burst into two that day

The voice opened the eyes of mankind. (Mubuma, 1999)

The language presupposes that the message must be taken seriously. The epic is replete with instructions from Ngiambe, disobedience and punishment, even by the captions of its episodes. The similarity between the language of the text and biblical language is plain with expressions like evil spirits, "power of the Almighty," and the exodus to the promised land with distressing distractions by spirit beings which bear reflections of the Israelite exodus and Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress. This, however, may reflect the translator's choice of words. The puritan motif of the text is prominent, Ngiambe and his laws constitute the norm, which the Ancestors encourage the living Mongo to obey.

The artistic build-up of the events and the rhetoric exchange which lead to the confrontation between *Famaa* Da and Basi gives an interesting perspective of the poetics of the epic, it begins with the subtle intrigues of Segu through which *Famaa* Da approaches Basi. The language between them is incisive, demeaning and painful and demands prompt reaction because of its strong connotations. Basi uses proverbial and metaphorical language loaded densely with significations typical of the consciousness of the Segovian cultural climate, punctuated by elements of disbelief and shock at the effrontery of *Famaa* Da's request for his virgin, noble daughter's hand in marriage. This defames *Famaa* Da's honour which he must protect. Basi's response is coded in questions and exclamations; Eh, does Da not know his grandfather Ngolo?... Eh, Da sending you to ask me for my daughter to marry! Eh, Da made a mistake in the words coming from his mouth (David, 2004). In like manner, *Famaa* Da displays shock, with his eyes

turning "red as a weaver bird's," "'Eh, you Griot!... Eh, but I already swore not to harm you. So what can I do?" (David, 2004). These words capture his thoughts and his mood, his anger showing in the colour of his eyes. The shock expressed by Basi and *Famaa* Da is like the two sides of a coin. The epic highly projects the denotation and the shades of connotation in Basi's words so forcefully that an impending war between them is inevitably contracted without room for peaceful settlement or withdrawal. Can *Famaa* Da accept that he is a slave when he has slaves under his command? Can Basi refuse to fight when *Famaa* Da attacks, can he sue for peace? Obviously, not. The Mwindo Epic deploys the capitalization on the emotional element of words to create affect. The child Mwindo wails and instead of love and compassion, his father fumes and devices the method of encasing him in a drum and throwing him into the pool to drown. The child cries out "This time, my father has no mercy; what! A small baby is willingly maltreated!" (Daniel et al., 1969). The words of Mwindo, apart from the facts they convey, generate deep sympathy for him and disdain for his father, they also create a physical contrast that accentuates the absurdity of his father. When he calls himself a small baby, the towering image of his father is conjured, but instead of "father" to be protective of "small baby," the father is destructive. This caricatures the father/baby relationship in a hideous and grotesque manner that renders Shemwindo damnable by all conceivable standards so that when Mwindo forgives him, it shocks the audience and gives his personality a positive hue.

5. Conclusion

In the African epics and heroic tales, there are human experiences and rudiments of the human nature that delineates how justice can be interpreted. The narratives depict the award of appropriate recompense that either satisfies or dissatisfies the inherent human quest for equity, the need for models of moral conduct and restraint, and the benign or inimical tendencies in human relations. Therefore, there are no exceptions to the contradictions created by attitudes that present truth and falsehood, justice and injustice, morality and immorality, and the ethical and the unethical. These are the nuclei for the themes and the propelling force of actions and speeches that culminate in the denouement in which contraventions find redress. This study therefore illuminates the dimensions and principles of justice by depicting the proportions of equity and fairness in human relations through the philosophy, worldview and logic of the cultures that produced the epics.

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